

The “I Can’t” Funeral

by Phillip B. Childs

Donna’s fourth grade classroom looked like many others I had seen in the past. The teacher’s desk was in front and faced the students. The bulletin board featured student work. In most respects it appeared to be a typically traditional elementary classroom. Yet something seemed different that day when I entered it for the first time.

My job was to make classroom visitations and encourage implementation of a training program that focused on language arts ideas that would empower students to feel good about themselves and take charge of their lives. Donna was one of the volunteer teachers who participated in this project.

I took an empty seat in the back of the room and watched. All the students were working on a task, filling a sheet of notebook paper with thoughts and ideas. The ten-year-old student next to me was filling her page with “I Can’ts”. “I can’t kick the soccer ball past second base.” “I can’t do long division with more than three numerals.” “I can’t get Debbie to like me.” Her page was half full and she showed no signs of letting up. She worked on with determination and persistence. I walked down the row glancing at students’ papers. Everyone was writing sentences, describing things they couldn’t do.

By this time the activity engaged my curiosity, so I decided to check with the teacher to see what was going on, but I noticed she too was busy writing. I felt it best not to interrupt. “I can’t get John’s mother to come for a teacher conference.” “I can’t get my daughter to put gas in the car.” “I can’t get Alan to use words instead of fists.”

Thwarted in my efforts to determine why students and teacher were dwelling on the negative instead of writing the more positive “I Can” statements, I returned to my seat and continued my observations.

The students wrote for another ten minutes. They were then instructed to fold the papers in half and bring them to the front. They placed their “I Can’t” statements into an empty shoe box. Then Donna added hers. She put the lid on the box, tucked it under her arm and headed out the door and down the hall.

Students followed the teacher. I followed the students. Halfway down the hallway Donna entered the custodian’s room, rummaged around and came out with a shovel. Shovel in one hand, shoe box in the other, Donna marched the students out to the school to the farthest corner of the playground. There they began to dig. They were going to bury their “I Can’ts”!

The digging took over ten minutes because most of the fourth graders wanted a turn. The box of “I Can’ts” was placed in a position at the bottom of the hole and then quickly covered with dirt. Thirty-one 10 and 11 year-olds

stood around the freshly dug grave site. At this point Donna announced, “Boys and girls, please join hands and bow your heads.” They quickly formed a circle around the grave, creating a bond with their hands.

They lowered their heads and waited. Donna delivered the eulogy.

“Friends, we gathered here today to honor the memory of “I Can’t”. While he was with us here on earth, he touched the lives of everyone, some more than others. We have provided ‘I Can’t’ with a final resting place and a headstone that contains his epitaph. He is survived by his brothers and sisters, ‘I Can’, ‘I Will’, and ‘I’m Going to Right Away’. They are not as well known as their famous relative and are certainly not as strong and powerful yet. Perhaps some day, with your help, they will make an even bigger mark on the world. May ‘I Can’t’ rest in peace and may everyone present pick up their lives and move forward in his absence. Amen.”

As I listened I realized that these students would never forget this day. Writing “I Can’ts”, burying them and hearing the eulogy. That was a major effort on this part of the teacher. And she wasn’t done yet.

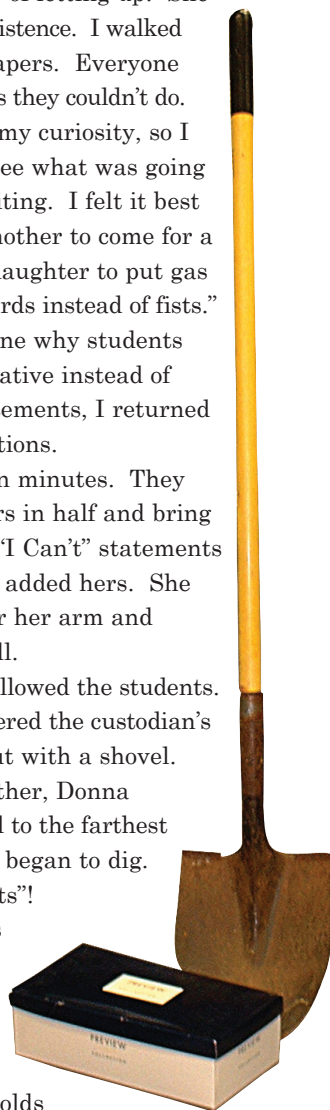
She turned the students around, marched them back into the classroom and held a wake. They celebrated the passing of “I Can’t” with cookies, popcorn and fruit juices. As part of the celebration, Donna cut a large tombstone from butcher paper. She wrote the words “I Can’t” at the top and put RIP in the middle. The date was added at the bottom. The paper tombstone hung in Donna’s classroom for the remainder of the year.

On those rare occasions when a student forgot and said, “I Can’t”, Donna simply pointed to the RIP sign. The student then remembered that “I Can’t” was dead and chose to rephrase the statement. I wasn’t one of Donna’s students. She was one of mine. Yet that day I learned an enduring lesson from her as years later, I still envision that fourth grade class laying to rest, “I Can’t”.

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In your life, why not bury the “I Can’ts” and move forward with “I can!” “I will!” and “I will do it right away!”



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